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BETTER THAN GIOTTO?

Deborah Parker

From one perspective, Vasari's *Life* of Giotto is an unabashed encomium. In the grand scheme of the *Lives of the Artists*, Giotto is the first pinnacle in the story of art's progress—a prodigious progenitor whose naturalism paves the way for Michelangelo. Giotto vanquishes the “maniera greca,” the much reviled Byzantine style, with its stiff disembodied figures, staring eyes, pointed hands, and other “monstrous” features.¹ Through extraordinary diligence, he imparts order and proportion to scenes inspired by his acute observation of the natural world. The Florentine painter inaugurates the “maniera di Giotto,” a naturalism whose hallmarks are vivacious figures with expressive gestures, the bodies attired in diverse, flowing garments. As befits an encomium, there are no criticisms of Giotto in Vasari's life of the artist, no mention of his shortcomings. A legend in his own time, Giotto, after his death, became a touchstone, the measure against which subsequent artists were judged.

Yet, as Vasari's account of the achievements of Giotto's disciples shows, the technical standard Giotto represented did not prove to be unattainable. After the *Life* of Giotto, Vasari goes on to recount the lives of five of Giotto's assistants: Stefano, Pietro Laurati (Lorenzetti), Pietro Cavallini, Simone Memmi (Martini), and Taddeo Gaddi.² As befits a story of art's ascendancy, all were worthy imitators. Nevertheless, some surpassed their master in a particular work or

in their perfection of a technique. Pietro Cavallini is praised as the artist who, after Giotto, restored painting in Rome. Simone is lauded for his portraiture. Pietro Laurati imitated Giotto so adeptly in his scenes for the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala in Siena that contemporaries believed, “with great reason,” that he would become a better master than Cimabue and Giotto.³ Similarly, Vasari praises Taddeo Gaddi for his coloring, the one area in which he surpassed his master. Vasari's most extravagant praise, however, is reserved for Stefano. Paired with the less accomplished Ugolino Sanese, who clung to the “maniera greca,” Stefano exemplifies the brilliance that is attainable for artists who follow in Giotto's footsteps. Consider the first sentence of this *Life*: “Stefano, painter of Florence and disciple of Giotto, was so excellent, that he not only surpassed all the others who had laboured in art before him, but outstripped his own master himself by so much that he was held, and deservedly, the best of all the painters who had lived up to that time, as his works clearly demonstrate” (“Fu in modo eccellente Stefano pittore fiorentino e discepolo di Giotto, che non pure *superò* tutti gl'altri che inanzi a lui si erano affaticati nell'arte, ma *avanzò* di tanto il suo maestro stesso che fu, e *meritamente*, tenuto il miglior di quanti pittori erano stati in sino a quel tempo, come chiaramente dimostrano l'opere sue”—my emphases).⁴ As the accolades “surpassed,” “outstripped,” and “deservedly” indicate,

Vasari recontextualizes Giotto's achievements in the light of the work of his brilliant disciple.

Elsewhere in Stefano's life, Vasari goes on to single out the painter's other outstanding achievements. Although none of these works is extant, it is worth noting the features that make them exceptional in Vasari's eyes. In the cloister of Santo Spirito, Stefano suggests the bodies of figures beneath their draperies in his depiction of the disciples in the *Transfiguration of Christ with Moses and Elijah*, an accomplishment hitherto unprecedented. In the same work, he draws a building in perspective perfectly, working with "very great judgment in modern fashion" ("giudizio grandissimo, modernamente operando").⁵ No less stupefying is Stefano's depiction of Christ delivering Saint Peter from the shipwreck, another vivid scene that garnered, among "moderni," high praise for its realism. Elsewhere, Stefano's use of foreshortening in his rendition of Satan's arms, legs, and trunk in the first cloister of Santa Maria Novella constitutes another innovation. For these achievements, contemporaries deemed Stefano the "ape of nature." Vasari returns to Stefano's use of foreshortening at the end his life:

[Although] he showed a faulty manner in them by reason of the difficulty of making them, none the less he who is the pioneer in the difficulties of any exercise deserves a much greater name than those who follow with a somewhat more ordered and regular manner. Truly great, therefore, is the debt that should be acknowledged to Stefano, because he who walks in darkness and gives heart to others, by showing them the way, brings it about that its difficult steps are made easy, so that with lapse of time men leave the false road and attain to the desired goal.

*Ancora che . . . cattiva maniera in essi per la difficoltà di fargli mostrasse, chi è nondimeno investigatore delle prime difficoltà negli'essercizii, merita molto più nome di coloro che seguono con qualche più ordinata e regolata maniera. Onde certo grande obbligo avere si dee a Stefano, perché chi camina al buio e mostrando la via rincuora gl'altri, è cagione che scoprendosi i passi difficili di quella, dal cattivo camino con spazio di tempo si pervenga al desiderato fine.*⁶

Notwithstanding the imperfections of his foreshortenings, Stefano deserves much credit for bringing the use of this technique to light and revealing its possibilities to subsequent artists, a brilliant achievement that Vasari underscores by adapting Dante's observations about the inspirational power of Virgil's poetry in *Purgatory*:

Facesti come quei che va di notte,
che porta lume dietro a sé non giova,
ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte

*You did as he who goes by night and carries
the lamp behind him—he is of no help
to his own self but teaches those who follow. (Purgatory, 22.67–69)*⁷

In these lines, Statius explains to Virgil that he converted to Christianity after reading the fourth *Eclogue*: although Virgil could not enlighten himself, his prophetic lines about a new age inspired Statius's conversion. Vasari cannily adapts Dante's treatment of darkness and illumination in the Purgatorial passage: Stefano, although unenlightened himself about the complexities of foreshortening, illuminates the possibilities afforded by this technique for subsequent artists. Taken together, the many laudable aspects of Stefano's art—his superior

draftsmanship, the softness of his draperies, his ability to suggest the human form beneath them, the sweet air of his figures, their beautiful attitudes, and his precocious use of perspective and foreshortening—approximate the hallmarks of the “maniera moderna,” and in this achievement Stefano eclipses the “maniera di Giotto.”

Lamentably, since none of Stefano’s works has survived, we are unable to verify Vasari’s claims.⁸ Clearly, Stefano’s achievements and innovations would not have been possible without Giotto, who remains the undisputed artist *par excellence* of the first part of the *Lives*. Our understanding of Vasari’s treatment of Giotto, however, is limited, if we confine our assessment of his art to what is conveyed in the *Life* of Giotto. As the refinements achieved by Giotto’s disciples attest, Giotto’s art initiates the grand story of art’s progress and spawns another luminary in Stefano. Ultimately, the recalibration of Giotto’s achievement that occurs in the *Life* of Stefano (not to mention Vasari’s

account of Giotto’s shortcomings in the introduction to the second part of the *Lives*) shows a distinctively mobile notion of perfection: it keeps moving to a higher plane.⁹ Although Giotto—in his moment—is unsurpassed and stupefying, his students, especially Stefano, begin to show us the artist’s limits. Vasari evinces a peculiar brand of historicism by employing a dual interpretation: Giotto, as viewed in his moment, is unsurpassable; but later, the subsequent development of Tuscan art shows his limits. The standards that Vasari evokes are at once ultimate in their moment and relative within the history of art: this contradiction emerges again and again, notably when other artistic cynosures are identified, the great names in art that Baudelaire memorably deemed “lighthouses posted along the track of historic time.”¹⁰ In such a vision of progress, no ideal standard exists outside of time. What we have is a constantly evolving standard, a kind of historicism *avant la lettre*.

NOTES

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1997), I, p. 250 (hereinafter cited as Vasari/de Vere). All English translations are from this edition. All citations of Vasari in Italian are taken from the following edition: Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, ed. Paola Della Pergola, Luigi Grassi, and Giovanni Previtali (Novara: Istituto geografico de Agostini, 1967) (hereinafter cited as Vasari/Previtali). For overviews of Vasari as writer, see T. S. R. Boase, *Giorgio Vasari: The Man and the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Laura Riccò, *Vasari Scrittore: La prima edizione del libro delle Vite* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979); Paul Barolsky, *Why Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 1995); *Reading Vasari*, ed. Anne B. Barriault *et al.* (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, 2005); and David Cast, *The Delight of Art: Giorgio Vasari and the Traditions of Humanist Discourse* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009). For a recent discussion of the authorship of the *Lives*, see Marco Ruffini, *Art without an Author: Vasari’s Lives and Michelangelo’s Death* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

2. On Giotto’s other disciples, Vasari notes the following: Pietro Lauratti imitated successfully the manner of Giotto and became a better master than Cimabue and Giotto. Vasari praises Lauratti’s depiction of the Lives of Holy Fathers on the wall beside the principal door in Pisa’s Campo Santo, noting that the expressions and attitudes of the figures are so beautiful that he “equaled” Giotto. See Vasari/de Vere, I, p. 131. Vasari deems Pietro Cavallini another worthy

follower, one who studied the works of Giotto's other disciples. Vasari makes the same observation of Simone Martini, who counterfeited the "maniera di Giotto." At the end of his *Life of Taddeo Gaddi*, Vasari notes that Taddeo adhered constantly to the manner of Giotto "but did not better it much save in the colouring, which he made fresher and more vivacious than that of Giotto, the latter having applied himself so ardently to improving the other departments and difficulties of this art, that although he gave attention to this, he could not, however, attain to the privilege of doing it, whereas *Taddeo, having seen that which Giotto had made easy and having learnt it, had time to add something and to improve the colouring*" (my emphasis). See Vasari/de Vere, I, p. 178.

3. Hayden B. J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 25.

4. Vasari/de Vere, I, p. 126. For the Italian, see Vasari/Previtali, I, p. 353. It is worth noting that Vasari's praise of Stefano is more emphatic in the second edition of the *Vite*. The first sentence of the 1550 edition is "Era tanta la fama della nuova pittura, e tanto erano onorati gli artefici di quella per le maraviglie che Giotto faceva a paragone di quelli che inanzi a lui in muri e in tavole avevano operato, che molti giovani pronti e volenterosi si mettevano ad imparare tale arte scioperandosi da tutto il resto degli esercizi, e sentendo il bene che del continuo ne traevano volentieri vi perseveravano." See the online version of the *Vite*, II, p. 133: <http://biblio.signum.sns.it/vasari/consultazione/Vasari/indice.html>.

5. Vasari/Previtali, I, p. 354. For the English translation, see Vasari/de Vere, I, p. 127.

6. Vasari/Previtali, I, pp. 357–358. For the English translation, see Vasari/de Vere, I, p. 130.

7. See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1984), p. 203.

8. Although no traces of Stefano's art are extant, some art historians have attributed some of the recently restored frescoes in the abbey of Chiaravalle to Stefano. However, the question of attribution remains open due to much missing data. For a discussion of the frescoes, see *Un poema cistercense: affreschi giotteschi a Chiaravalle Milanese*, ed. Sandrina Bandera Bistoletti (Milan: Electa, 2010).

9. In the preface to the second part of the *Lives*, Vasari, after praising features of Giotto's painting, mentions what the artist failed to achieve: "Besides this, he [Giotto] made a beginning with the expression of emotions, so that fear, hope, rage, and love could in some sort be recognized; and he reduced his manner, which at first was harsh and rough, to a certain degree of softness; and although he did not make the eyes with that beautiful roundness that makes them lifelike, and the tear-channels that complete them, and the hair soft, and the beards feathery, and the hands with their due joints and muscles, and the nudes true to life, let him find excuse in the difficulty of the art and the fact that he saw no better painters than himself; . . . And thereby it is shown that he had a very good, if not a perfect judgment." The praise of Giotto is much more measured in the preface than in the *Life* of the artist. See Vasari/de Vere, I, p. 250. Such passages underscore the importance of reading across the *Lives* to obtain a comprehensive view of Vasari's assessments of artists, especially the trailblazers whose achievements are discussed in different *Lives*.

10. Baudelaire's comment, as Roger Fry notes, presents the lighthouses as unvarying beacons. In reality, Vasari's treatment of the pinnacles of art is constantly evolving. As Fry notes in his discussion of Fra Bartolommeo: "The simile, as he used it, seizes the imagination and represents a great truth, but it allows of an interpretation which the limits of a sonnet form forbade him to develop. He takes the lights of his beacons as much for granted as the sailor does the lights of real lighthouses. But the lighthouses of art do not burn with so fixed and unvarying a lustre. The light they give is always changing insensibly with each generation, now brighter, now dimmer, and often enough growing bright once more. But we sometimes forget that the lights have to be tended or they grow faint and may expire altogether. For them to burn brightly, they must be fed by the devotion of some few spirits in each generation. If that fails for a long period they go out and become one of those dead, ineffectual names which still linger on, obstructions rather than aids to the historical voyager." See Roger Fry, *Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 109.

THE ARTIST'S SIGNATURE AS A SIGN OF INAUTHENTICITY

Livio Pestilli

The artist's desire to leave a mark of authorship by signing or inscribing his or her name on his or her creation is a practice well rooted in Western tradition and most clearly recorded in Pliny's claim that Apelles and Polyclitus did so by employing the imperfect tense "faciebat" after their name: "Apelles faciebat aut Polycleitus." The implication, Pliny elucidates, was that the work could have been perfected even more had the artists not been prevented by fate.¹ Modern studies have shown that anonymity in medieval art is an erroneous construct, a fiction or myth already present in Vasari, but especially propagated by authors such as Burckhardt in the nineteenth century.² Recent scholarship has further shown that even geographic areas in which artists were traditionally considered self-effacing were equally characterized by strong artistic presences, such as the eleventh-century Georgian monk Ioannes Tohabi in the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, who not only signed six icons but also included his self-portrait in one of them.³ It is debatable how much medieval and Renaissance contractual norms, which insisted that no artist contribute to the execution of an artifact other than the master himself, aided the propagation of the age-old practice of signing works of art in early modern Europe. There is no doubt, however, that by the end of the fifteenth century the sign of the artist could most tangibly be perceived through this common phenomenon.⁴

However, what guarantee of authenticity do we have when such written assurances are missing? A modern instance in which the only source of authorship was hearsay rather than literary or documentary data occurred in the summer of 1984, when the Livorno administration, at the behest of the curator of the Modern Art Gallery, Vera Durbè, went "fishing" in the Fosso Reale (the artificial canal surrounding Livorno) for some Modigliani sculptures that the artist had reputedly discarded in 1909 out of anger because some friends had criticized them.⁵ When, after repeated attempts, the dredging consigned a total of three 12-by-18-inch sculpted heads and many specialists pronounced themselves in favor of the authenticity of the pieces, three university students publicly announced that they had produced one of them by using some rudimentary implements and a Black & Decker drill.⁶

In the ensuing embarrassment and loss of face, the art experts, whose eyes were so easily deceived, could at least console themselves with the thought that the Modigliani fakes were not signed. What complicates matters is when works carrying signatures directly conflict with what we see or expect from a specific master. Are there instances in which the artist's signature is an indication of his or her marginal presence, if not of the work's inauthentic status altogether?

In his *Art and Architecture in Italy 1250-1400*, John White points to a case where this apparent paradox can be taken as the excep-

tion that proves the rule. He found that there was such a “drop in quality” when turning from Giotto’s “pre-Renaissance *gravitas*” in the Peruzzi Chapel to the only three works he signed—*The Stigmatization of Saint Francis* in the Louvre, the polyptych of *The Virgin and Child with Saints Peter and Paul and Archangels Gabriel and Michael* in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, and the panel representing *The Coronation of the Virgin* in the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence—that he doubted the authenticity of the signed works. In White’s words, “Attributionally speaking, the prime significance of these three panels is precisely that they seem to show that Giotto signed those major products of his workshop which he had largely not himself painted. These were the works that were in need of the protection of a signature to prove their provenance. In the panels that he carried out himself his brushwork was its own endorsement. This, if true, reveals the not unexpected extent of the commercial organization of his workshop.”⁷ Indeed, it comes as no surprise that artists often found it expedient, if not necessary, to utilize assistants to meet the mounting demand of their patrons.⁸ Thus, for example, we learn from a letter written by Fra Pietro da Novellara to Isabella d’Este, who had requested a painting by Leonardo’s hand, that the painter was too busy to oblige her. Fra Pietro nonchalantly reports that Leonardo “has done nothing else, except that his two apprentices are painting portraits and he sometimes adds a few touches.”⁹

What White signaled with regard to Giotto’s three signed paintings also applies to another icon of Renaissance art: Raphael’s *Fornarina* (Fig. 1). In 1597, Lodovico Cre-maschi, the Mantuan agent of Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga, saw the painting in the house of the Contessa di Santa Fiore and

described it as a Venus wearing the telltale signed bracelet: “la mezza Venere nuda, con occhi e capelli nigri, nel braccio sinistro della quale, in un braccialetto è scritto Raphael Urbinas.”¹⁰ Although we only have circumstantial evidence, John Shearman believed this painting was “unquestionably a version (probably the original) of the Fornarina, now in Palazzo Barberini.”¹¹ Luitpold Dussler, on the other hand, claimed that, despite the signature on the bracelet, “the invention may well be by Raphael himself, but the execution was most probably the work of Giulio Romano.”¹² Konrad Oberhuber, instead, proposed a compromise that perhaps comes closer to reality by suggesting “it is possible that face and background had remained somewhat incomplete and were given a finishing touch by Raphael’s pupil and heir, Giulio Romano, in order to make the picture saleable.”¹³ In fact, if one compares the subtle, soft, painterly passages of Raphael’s brush in the *Velata* in the Pitti Palace, whose authenticity, according to Dussler, “is now beyond doubt,” to the hard, enamel-like features of the *Fornarina*, even after its recent cleaning, there is an undeniable drop in quality comparable to what White saw in Giotto’s paintings.¹⁴ Indeed, while in the eleven other signed Raphaels his name is discretely placed within the context of the compositions, the very fact that the *Fornarina* showcases the master’s name so prominently—aside from suggesting an affiliation between sitter and painter—may indicate a need for a safeguard to reassure prospective buyers that it came from Raphael’s atelier.¹⁵ In this case, therefore, the conspicuous inscription is more likely evidence of its inauthenticity—that is, the painting was not executed entirely by Raphael’s own hand.

This also seems to have been the case with



Fig. 1 Raphael, *La Fornarina*. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome

the Vienna version of Titian's *Danaë* (Fig. 2), the third most accredited variant of the seven extant versions of the subject. The original one, which he painted for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese and personally delivered in Rome in the fall of 1545, is one of those masterpieces whose beauty and subtlety of coloring and shading could only come from the hand of Titian himself. Even if we had neither Vasari's account of this painting nor Cardinal Giovanni della Chiesa's letter to Cardinal Farnese describing the *Venus of Urbino* as a "Theatine nun" in comparison to it, just the warm tonal unity of the canvas, the suppleness of Danaë's flesh, and the superb shading of her face would be sufficient assurance of the master's presence.¹⁶ The same may be said with regard to the Madrid version of the picture, painted about nine years later for King Philip II of Spain, although some questions have been raised as to how much Titian's assistants contributed to its execution.¹⁷ Here the master's style has undergone a definite change, but the quality of his brushwork is sufficient evidence of the work's authenticity.¹⁸ Such is not the case with the variant now at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which is probably slightly later than the 1554 Prado version and whose patron or first owner is unknown (Fig. 2).¹⁹ While the quality of this painting is still high, compared to the Naples version it shows a definite qualitative slump and a cooler, marmoreal rendition of the figure, which suggests a more pervasive presence of Titian's assistants. Although it has been claimed that Titian signed more paintings later in life because many more were being shipped outside of Venice, the prominent placement of his signature at the lower right ("TITIANUS.AEQUES.CAES.")—painted *on* the picture, instead of being included *in* it—should raise some doubts about

the extent of his direct intervention.²⁰ In fact, the practice of adding just a brushstroke or two to work carried out by his assistants is something for which Malvasia cynically criticizes Titian, saying that he often passed off his students' work as his own for financial gain.²¹

An artist who had a successful commercial organization of a workshop that churned out numerous copies of his paintings and who, in contrast to Titian, almost never signed his canvases was Guido Reni. The only two instances in which Reni's name appears on a painting are the *Venus and Cupid* in the Toledo Museum of Art, plausibly painted in 1626 although the date is partially abraded (Fig. 3), and a version of his portrait of Cardinal Roberto Ubaldini, painted in 1625, which was destroyed in the bombing of Montecassino.²² In the *Venus and Cupid*, nicknamed *Il Diamante* because it was made for a goldsmith who purchased it with a diamond valued at 150 scudi, Guido's name is inscribed somewhat cryptically: "GUIDUS V.F.," followed below by the letters "C.B.T.P."²³ Stephen Pepper, who tentatively decoded the inscription of the second line as an abbreviation of "Civis Bononiae tabulam pinxit" (Guido, citizen of Bologna, painted the picture), suggested that one possible reading of the letters "V.F." next to Guido's name is that they are the initials of the goldsmith who commissioned it. The reason given is that the picture might have been a shrewd investment on the part of the goldsmith, who "may have asked Reni to sign and date his work to insure that his property would receive its full market value, or even signed the work himself and incorporated his own initials."²⁴ Although this explanation is not fully convincing, for Pepper "the Toledo *Venus* epitomizes what for more than a century throughout Europe was appreciated by many as the



Fig. 2 Titian, *Danaë*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

highest attainment of perfection.”²⁵ On the wings of his expert opinion, other scholars have accepted the work as an authentic Guido—that is, as a work completed *di sua propria mano*.²⁶

The one scholar who took issue with this interpretation was Richard Spear, who expressed serious doubts about its authenticity and, justly in my view, saw the presence of the “anomalous ‘signature’” as a sign of the artist’s absence, rather than his presence.²⁷ “I think that it is a studio product, lacking both Reni’s structure of form and suppleness of fabrics,”²⁸ wrote Spear, who supported his opinion by juxtaposing the face of Venus in the Toledo painting with that of Charity in the *Allegory of Christian Charity* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, painted around 1628–1629. Since the two paintings were executed at about the same time, the comparison is apposite and, as far as the present author is concerned, convincing. The hand that executed Venus’s face is certainly not the same one that painted Charity’s—a further reminder that the inclusion of a signature or inscription on a canvas is no certificate of authenticity.²⁹

However, in most instances we do rely on artists’ signatures to validate our assumptions about a work’s autograph quality, especially with paintings from the seventeenth century onward, when the practice of signing in cursive script to designate intellectual property became prevalent.³⁰ A case in point is a picture by the Neapolitan artist Paolo de Matteis, who frequently signed his paintings as well as his drawings. Recently, a *Nativity* in a private collection (Fig. 4) has been taken as an autograph work on the basis of its signature, which appears on the manger post. The painting has also been taken as the source of a copy executed by de Matteis’s

assistants.³¹ While the author of these opinions admits that a signature does not constitute proof of authorship, his subsequent analysis led him to confirm the attribution. And yet, greater familiarity with de Matteis’s brushwork precludes such accreditation. If one looks at a few of his religious paintings, it is easy to understand why his biographer, Bernardo De Dominici, proclaimed that his “religious pictures, especially [his many versions of] the Madonna and Child, could not be more beautifully conceived nor better executed, as some of these images seem to have descended [directly] from Paradise.”³² Contrary to the heavenly beauty of most of his Madonnas, the Virgin’s nose in the two pictures under discussion has developed an aquiline droop that renders Mary’s face anything but ideal, and the Christ Child seems more of a miniature man than an adorable child.³³ Despite the presence of de Matteis’s signature, this is certainly a case in which assistants replicated a successful formula to meet the great demand for such devotional pictures. In this instance, as well, the artist’s signature is a reassuring sign that guaranteed a provenance from de Matteis’s studio. Nevertheless, in the modern sense of what constitutes authenticity, the two *Nativities* cannot be considered originals.³⁴

Revisiting White’s statements about Giotto’s three signed paintings, Charles Harrison lucidly formulated the issues involved in ascertaining the authenticity of a work of art. He explains that in the absence of documentary evidence, we will rely on less dependable information, such as literary sources and other circumstantial evidence, that we take as positive indications of an artistic identity or individual style. Ultimately, in making attributions, we will have to rely on our eyes, and “all other things



Fig. 3 Guido Reni, *Venus and Cupid*. Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio



Fig. 4 Paolo de Matteis, *Nativity*. Private collection

being equal . . . we will accept that a work is by Giotto if and only if we find it fitting to represent the artist that we take him to be. To the extent that the name of Giotto is associated with supreme artistic achievement, we will be likely to reject any work that seems to fall short in quality. . . . If an apparently documented work fails to meet these expectations, it may then be the value of the documentation that is questioned.”³⁵ Thus, in determining authorship, even when judging works that display the artist’s signature or an inscription with his name, we will inevitably have to rely on connoisseurship. This, of course, presents other problems, since connoisseurship, as the Abbé du Bos observed, is “the most faulty of all the arts after medicine.”³⁶ Despite the arbitrary

nature of this practice, in instances where documentation is unavailable, it is only through extensive familiarity with a master’s hand, a healthy dose of humility, indifference to the market value of the artifact, and intellectual honesty that matters of artistic authorship may be resolved.

In a letter to Giovanni Colonna of 1337 in which he appries his friend of a “*passeggiata romana*,” of the many sites he visited, and the historical resonance they held for him, Petrarch refers to his encounter with the giant statues of Castor and Pollux on the Quirinal (Fig. 5). Although the twelfth-century *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* had proposed that the two Latin inscriptions, “*Opus Fidiaie*” and “*Opus Praxitelis*” referred to “two seers who arrived in Rome under

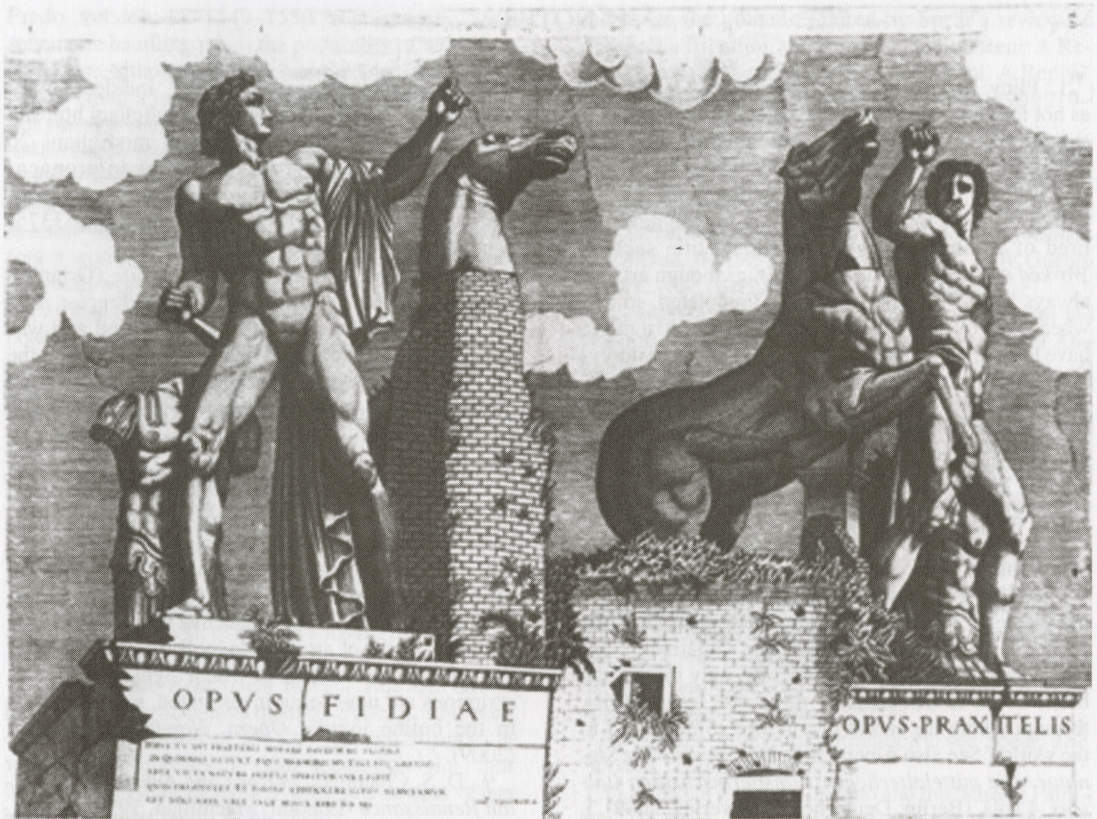


Fig. 5 Antoine Lafréry, *Castor and Pollux*. Engraving

Tiberius, naked, to tell the 'bare truth' that the princes of the world were like horses which had not yet been mounted by a true king," Petrarch sagaciously observes: "In these marbles one still sees, after so many centuries, the contest of artistic ingenuity between Praxiteles and Phidias."³⁷ Having read his Pliny in the papal library while still in Avignon and having purchased his own copy of the *Historia Naturalis* in 1350, Petrarch was among the first intellectuals, if not the very first, to understand that the writing on the base of these statues referred to the two most celebrated sculptors of antiquity.³⁸ He could not have known that the two

inscriptions had probably been placed on the statues' pedestals in late antiquity, possibly after the earthquake of 442;³⁹ nor could he have entertained the idea that the two horse tamers had probably been carved in the early fourth century for the nearby Baths of Constantine.⁴⁰ As learned as he was and even though his statement was supported by captions and literary sources, with regard to *Castor and Pollux* Petrarch stands, perhaps, as the earliest example of a scholar who, by placing too much trust in signatures or inscriptions, fails to realize that these can be misleading and no guarantee of a work's authenticity.⁴¹

NOTES

1. Pliny, *Natural History*, Preface.26–27: “And so as not to seem a downright adversary of the Greeks, I should like to be accepted on the lines of those founders of painting and sculpture who, as you will find in these volumes, used to inscribe their finished works, even the masterpieces which we can never be tired of admiring, with a provisional title such as *Worked on by Apelles* or *Polyclitus*, as though art was always a thing in process and not completed, so that when faced by the vagaries of criticism the artist might have left him a line of retreat to indulgence, by implying that he intended, if not interrupted, to correct any defect noted.”

2. On anonymity in the Middle Ages as “fiction,” see Tobias Burg, *Die Signatur: Formen und Funktionen vom Mittelalter bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Lit, 2007), p. 14. Heinrich Klotz, “Formen der Anonymität und des Individualismus in der Kunst des Mittelalters und der Renaissance,” *Gesta* 15 (1976):303–312, asserted that the biblical source of the medieval restraint in boasting authorship is to be found in Saint Paul’s letter to the Galatians 6:14, where Paul declares: “As for me, the only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world.” See also Albert Dietl, *Die Sprache der Signatur: Die mittelalterlichen Künstlerinschriften Italiens*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009), I, pp. 12–13 and ff. See also Enrico Castelnovo, “I volti dell’artista medievale: Molte domande, poche risposte,” *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 4, no. 16 (2003):3–10, and Peter Cornelius Claussen, *Magistri doctissimi Romani: Die römischen Marmorkünstler des Mittelalters* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1987), p. 1, who specifies at the outset of a book that catalogues all of the sculptors’ names known to us that “die Künstler Roms, nicht nur die Marmorari, haben ihre Werke im Mittelalter häufig, wahrscheinlich in der Regel, signiert.”

3. Maria Lidova, “The Artist’s Signature in Byzantium: Six Icons by Ioannes Tohabi in Sinai Monastery (11th–12th Century),” in *Opera. Nomina. Historiae* 1 (2009):77–98. See http://onh.giornale.sns.it/pdf/01_2009/03_MLidova.pdf.

4. See Burg, pp. 275–285, for statistics. For Venice specifically but also for Italy in general, see Louisa C. Matthew, “The Painter’s Presence: Signatures in Venetian Renaissance Pictures,” *Art Bulletin* 80 (1998):616–648.

5. For summaries of the incident, see http://www.instoria.it/home/teste_modigliani.htm and http://www.ilgiornale.it/interni/falsi_modigliani_26_anni_fa_beffa_che_fece_giro_mondo/cronaca-attualit-modigliani-testa-teste-falso-livorno-scherzo-zeri-tv-panorama/25-07-2010/articolo-id=463375-page=0-comments=1.

6. Jeffrey Meyers, *Modigliani: A Life* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), p. 237: “The museum director, who watched this event on television, collapsed and was rushed to a hospital. Local bakers, capitalizing on the incident, made large loaves shaped like the newfound heads. The tool company publicized the event with an advertisement that boasted: ‘It’s easy to be talented with a Black & Decker.’”

7. John White, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1250–1400*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1993), pp. 340–341.

8. On the function and meanings of inscriptions in the Middle Ages, see Burg, p. 14. The point that signatures are more than mere data that help in attributing or dating works of art is made by Burg, pp. 31 and ff. For the various contexts in which signatures and inscriptions are now being investigated, see the entries in the online journal *Opera. Nomina. Historia* 1 (2009).

9. D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 145.

10. John Shearman, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources (1483–1602)*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), II, pp. 1415–1416, no. 1597/1.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 1401.

12. Luitpold Dussler, *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue of His Pictures, Wall-Paintings and Tapestries*, trans. Sebastian Cruft (London: Phaidon, 1971), p. 43.

13. Konrad Oberhuber, *Raphael: The Paintings* (New York: Prestel, 1999), p. 208.

14. Dussler, p. 32.

15. Burg, p. 284, indicates that out of 110 works by or attributed to Raphael, only 12 of them bear signatures.

16. Robert Wald, “Titian’s Vienna ‘Danae’: Observations on Execution and Replication in Titian’s Studio,” in Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, ed., *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, exh. cat. (Venice: Marsilio, 2008), pp. 125–133.

17. Jill Dunkerton, in her catalogue entry to the Capodimonte version (in David Jaffé, ed., *Titian* [London: National Gallery, 2003], cat. no. 23), dates the

Prado version to 1549–1550 and states: “Such schematic handling raises the possibility of workshop assistance, although, like the molten coins, the line between Titian’s looser, mature style and imitations of this manner is easily blurred.”

18. Charles Hope, *Titian* (London: Jupiter, 1980), p. 153: “It is worth remembering that, given his long association with Titian, Philip was in a unique position to know what an autograph painting looked like; therefore it would have been counter-productive to supply him with works of indifferent quality.”

19. *Ibid.*, p. 130: “It was first noted as being in the possession of Cardinal Montalto in Rome in 1600, in which year he sent the painting as a gift to Emperor Rudolf II in Prague.”

20. See Matthew, 642, n. 133, and 648, who suggests that Titian signed more paintings later in his life because “he may also have intended to differentiate between paintings by his own hand and those of his shop assistants.” According to Burg, p. 284, Titian signed 82 out of 308 paintings.

21. Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice: Vite dei pittori bolognesi*, 2 vols. (Bologna: Tip. Guidi all’ Ancora, 1841), II, p. 24. See Richard E. Spear, *The “Divine” Guido: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 256, also quoting Hope, p. 151, who comments on a letter of 1568 by Niccolò Stroppio in which Titian receives the same accusation—i.e., that he “finishes [student works] with two strokes of his brush and sells [them] as his own.”

22. For the dates, see D. Stephen Pepper’s entries on both paintings in *Nell’ Età di Correggio e dei Carracci: Pittura in Emilia dei secoli XVI e XVII*, exh. cat. (Bologna: Pinacoteca nazionale, 1986), pp. 511–514, nos. 181 and 182.

23. *Id.*, “Guido Reni’s ‘Il Diamante’: A New Masterpiece for Toledo,” *Burlington Magazine* 115 (Oct. 1973):630–641. See also *Guido Reni, 1575–1642*, exh. cat. (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1988), p. 120.

24. Pepper, “Guido Reni’s ‘Il Diamante,’” 634.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 641.

26. Pepper had already expressed his views in his entry for the painting in *Nell’ Età di Correggio e dei Carracci*, pp. 513–514; A. Mazza follows his lead in *Guido Reni 1575–1642*, p. 120. On the three possible meanings of the expression *di sua mano*, see Spear, pp. 253–274.

27. Richard E. Spear, “Re-viewing the ‘Divine’ Guido,” *Burlington Magazine* 131, no. 1034 (May 1989):367–372.

28. *Ibid.*, 372.

29. On the polemic ignited by Spear’s review of Pepper’s attribution, see Pepper’s “Guido Reni: A Review Reviewed” and Spear’s “Guido Reni: A Reply,” *Burlington Magazine* 132, no. 1044 (Mar. 1990):219–223.

30. A. J. Adams, “Rembrandt [fecit]: The Italic Signature and the Commodification of Artistic Identity,” in *Künstlerischer Austausch: Artistic Exchange, Akten des XXVIII. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte, Berlin, 15–20 July 1992*, ed. T. W. Gaehtgens, 2 vols. (Berlin: 1993), II, pp. 581–591.

31. Alessandro Rossi, “*Natività* a confronto: un’ invenzione di Paolo de Matteis e non di Ludovico Antonio David,” *Arte in Friuli Arte a Trieste* 26 (2007):99–108.

32. Bernardo De Dominici, *Vite de’ pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani*, 3 vols. (Naples: Nella stamperia del Ricciardi, 1742–1745), III, p. 543. There is now an annotated version of De Dominici’s *Lives* edited by Fiorella Sricchia Santoro and Andrea Zezza (Naples: Paparo, 2003–2008). For the present citation, see III, p. 1023.

33. Both versions are derived from the *Holy Family* in the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento. On de Matteis, see Livio Pestilli, *Paolo de Matteis: Neapolitan Painting and Cultural History in Baroque Europe* (United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2013).

34. On the subject of authenticity, see Spear, *The “Divine” Guido*, pp. 225–252.

35. Charles Harrison, “Giotto and the ‘Rise of Painting,’” in *Siena, Florence, and Padua: Art, Society, and Religion 1280–1400*, ed. Diana Norman, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), I, p. 76.

36. Jean Baptiste Dubos, *Reflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 3 vols. (Paris: 1719), II, p. 362, also quoted by Spear, *The “Divine” Guido*, p. 271, citing Julius S. Held, “The Early Appreciation of Drawings,” in *Latin American Art, and the Baroque Period in Europe: Studies in Western Art*, Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art, 1961 III (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 72–95.

37. Francesco Petrarca, *Le Familiari*, ed. Vittorio Rossi, 4 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1933–1942), II, pp. 55–60, VI.2.104–106: “Hoc Praxitelis Phidieque extans in lapide tot iam seculis de ingenio et arte certamen.”

38. Maurizio Bettini, “Tra Plinio e Sant’ Agostino: Francesco Petrarca sulle arti figurative,” in *Memoria dell’ antico nell’ arte italiana*, ed. Salvatore Settis, 3 vols. (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1984–1986), I, p. 237. See also Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and*

the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 136–141.

39. Haskell and Penny, p. 136, citing Adolf Michaelis, "Monte Cavallo," *Mitteilungen des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* (Römische Abteilung) 13 (1898):248–274. See also Burg, p. 181, quoting Jean Marcadé, *Recueil des signatures de sculpteurs grecs*, 2 vols. (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1953–1957), II, p. 118, on the appearance of inscriptions with Praxiteles' name on another marble plinth: "On sait par Pline [...] que plusieurs oeuvres de Praxitèle furent transportées à Rome, et il n'est pas exclu que ce socle ait réellement porté l'une d'entre elles. Mais l'inscription pouvait aussi bien n'être qu'une attribution fantaisiste."

40. Haskell and Penny, p. 139.

41. Marcadé, II, p. 116, s.v. "Praxiteles," specifies that in 1874 a base to a sculpture was found near the Basilica Julia and claims that it supported another "opus Praxitelis." *Id.*, II, p. 118: "L'abus des fausses signatures est dénoncé par Phèdre (*Fab.* V, prol.) et nous en avons des exemples fort nets. A Rome, on ne saurait admettre que les Dioscures du Monte Cavallo aient été l'un de Praxitèle, l'autre de Phidias, malgré les inscriptions (*CIL* VI 2, 10038) *Opus Praxitelis Opus Fidia* attestées à partir du XIV^e s. (cf. *IGB*, 494)." On Petrarch's encounter with the *Castor and Pollux* statues, see also Ulrich Pfisterer, "Phidias und Polyklet von Dante bis Vasari: Zu Nachruhm und künstlerischer Rezeption antiker Bildhauer in der Renaissance" *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 26 (1999):65–66.

WINE AND THE RENAISSANCE ARTIST

Norman E. Land

As is well known, wine was in several ways an important feature of the daily life of Renaissance Italians, including painters and sculptors.¹ Artists created and their patrons enjoyed and revered many works representing, for example, the drunken Noah, the Last Supper, Bacchus, and bacchanalian revelries. In his *Lives of the Artists* (Florence, 1568), Giorgio Vasari illustrates other, more personal ways in which wine was important for artists. For instance, he says that Michelangelo lived "extremely frugally" and even as a young man took for bodily nourishment only "a little bread and wine."² Vasari's description of Michelangelo's eating and drinking habits seems to hint at the Eucharistic significance of wine and bread, as if the "divine" and saintly artist also took spiritual nourishment from his simple diet, just as most Christians do at Holy Communion. Vasari even hints that Michelangelo lived what might be called "a transubstantiated life."

Vasari also says that wine was important for one of Michelangelo's friends in Rome, the Venetian painter Sebastiano Luciani (1485–1547), but in a different way. Having assumed the ecclesiastical office of *piombo* (keeper of leaden seals) and the religious habit of a friar, Fra Sebastiano del Piombo retired from practicing the art of painting because, as he used to remark, living a life of leisure is no less wise than constantly working for fame, profit, and honor. As Vasari disapprovingly tells us in his *vita* of the artist,

Sebastiano put his words into practice: "He always sought to have for his table all the best wines and the rarest luxuries that could be found, holding life in more account than art." Friends were important, too, and Sebastiano would invite the Modenese poets Francesco Maria Molza (1489–1544) and Gandolfo Porrino to supper, when the company would use the superb wine to make "right good cheer."³

Fra Sebastiano's use of wine, as described by Vasari, is sociable and genteel, and he and Michelangelo seem to represent prevalent attitudes toward the liquid.⁴ Nevertheless, we are told that other artists drank to excess. For example, Vasari says that the Dutch painter Martin Heemskerck (1498–1574) and his assistants got drunk on wine while making some excellent pictures depicting certain unspecified events involving Turks and Christians. In spite of their inebriation, the painters "executed those canvases with such assiduity and rapidity, in order that the work might be finished in time, that they never quitted their labour." Because, Vasari continues, they were "constantly drunk and inflamed with the heat of the wine," and because of "their facility in execution, they achieved wonders."⁵ Incredibly, the constant flow of "good Greco" wine helped the tipsy but skillful artists paint excellent pictures in a timely manner.

Renaissance authors before Vasari had already depicted artists who, like Heemskerck and his assistants, were fond of wine. For

example, in Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313–1375) *Decameron* (*novella* 8.6), the foolish simpleton Calandrino would drink to excess as long as he was not paying for the wine.⁶ Two centuries later, in a tale recorded by the Anonimo Gaddiano, Calandrino, who seems to have favored *vernaccia*, remains fond of the beverage. He, along with his friends Buonamico Buffalmacco (active c. 1313–1336) and another artist named Bruno, trick their patrons, the stingy and condescending nuns of Faenza, into supplying them daily with a very good wine. Vasari represents a sculptor named Nanni Grosso, a follower of Andrea del Verrocchio, in much the same way. Like Calandrino, Nanni was “molto astratto” (“very eccentric”) and, as a rule, would never accept a job that required him to leave his workshop, especially if the patrons were monks or friars. He would make an exception, however, if he were allowed unrestrained access to the patron's wine cellar, “so that he could go and drink whenever he wanted without asking permission.”⁷ Presumably, Nanni had leave to choose even the best wines in the cellar.

In his *Trecentonovelle* (*novella* 170), Franco Sacchetti (c. 1335–c. 1400) tells a tale about a painter named Bartolo Goggi, who is also much given to drink at the expense of other people, including a patron named Pino Brunelleschi, who commissioned the artist to paint a room in his villa. While Pino was away from home, Bartolo often raided the wine closet and drank to excess. Because of his inebriation, as Pino alleges, the painter did not fulfill the commission as he had been instructed.⁸ In another of Sacchetti's stories (*novella* 84), the wife of a certain Mino, a Sienese painter of crucifixes, accuses her husband of drinking both red and white wines in a single outing,

perhaps to suggest that he drinks without discrimination, only to become drunk. She also says that, generally speaking, painters are delusional lunatics who are “always getting drunk and feeling no shame.”⁹

Vasari tells us of another type of excessive drinker, Ercole Ferrarese, a fictive painter who combines features of Ercole de' Roberti (c. 1456–1496) and Ercole Grandi (1491–1531). The eccentric Ercole “had an extraordinary love of wine, and his frequent drunkenness did much to shorten his life.”¹⁰ With Ercole, we move beyond the associations of wine with religion, gentility, and humor to the bleak realm of alcoholism. Ercole, addicted to wine, slowly kills himself with each drunken bout.

Vasari's contemporary, the poet and translator Lodovico Domenichi (1515–1564) recounts an overlooked *facetia* about another painter and self-destructive drinker, this one anonymous. The narrator tells the tale as follows:

I made the acquaintance of a painter most excellent in his art, but otherwise a prodigal and a friend of wine: Now, employed by a gentleman, who had him paint in his castle, and pursuing the work begun some time ago, the painter said that he needed some colors, and thus some money with which he wanted to go to the nearby town and to buy what seemed to be necessary to finish the job. The gentleman in his simplicity, believing the words, counted out the money with which he [that is, the artist] asked to go to the city. Now when he arrived there, he put himself up at a good inn and did not seek any colors. The gentleman, seeing after a few days that the painter did not return, ordered his servants to go looking for him. They, having found him among a bunch of

drunkards and goodtime fellows, called him home again and asked if he had bought the colors. The painter said he had bought them, but through negligence, they were lost. The servants, taking a good look at his face, saw that wine had given him a very beautiful color; so they harshly informed him that he should say that he had lost the colors he had bought from the host [of the inn]. However, they suspected that after this drunken bout, the pallor would take away his color.¹¹

For Renaissance readers, part of the sad humor of this tale would have turned on the association of wine and paint, or colors.¹² When the servants ask the painter to produce the colors he was sent to buy, he says that the colors are lost. The servants see his rubicund face—the result of drinking too much wine—and, realizing that he has wasted the money on drink, say that he has lost the “colors” (that is, the wine) he bought from the innkeeper, implying that he has pissed the money, and hence the colors, away. They are also of the opinion that he has so excessively imbibed, he will soon be without color—his rosy complexion will give way to the pallor of death. In other words, death will drain away his “color,” his very life; and, as an artist, he will also lose his colors, his ability to paint. In short, they believe that, as happened to Vasari’s Ercole Ferrarese, his out-of-control drinking ultimately

will lead to his demise.

The literary image of the artist as a heavy drinker extends beyond Italy to northern Europe, especially to seventeenth-century Holland. For example, a story about the Dutch painter Frans Hals (c. 1580–1666) combines the elements of religion, humor, and excessive drinking. According to Arnold Houbraken (1660–1719), writing after Hals’s death, each evening the artist would imbibe an alcoholic beverage (perhaps beer rather than wine) so heavily that he required one of his students to guide him home. When safely in bed, the painter, even though drunk, would always say a prayer: “Dear Lord, bear me soon to your high heaven.” Once four of his students, including the prankster and alleged heavy drinker Adriaen Brouwer (1605–1638), decided to test the sincerity of the master’s nightly supplications. Using ropes, they devised a hidden means of raising Hals’s bed toward the ceiling. The next evening, “full-brimmed and sweet” after heavy drinking, Hals climbed into bed and repeated his customary prayer. Immediately Brouwer and the others began to lift the master’s bed heavenward. Whereupon Hals cried out, “Less haste, dear Lord, less haste, less haste.” After that incident, Houbraken says, Hals abandoned his desire for an early arrival in high heaven, but apparently not his taste for drink.¹³ Interestingly, in reality, Hals lived a long and fruitful life.

NOTES

1. See Elizabeth S. Cohen and Thomas V. Cohen, *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2001), p. 228. According to the authors, the average person consumed about two-thirds of a liter of the beverage per day.

2. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors,*

and Architects, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1996), II, p. 739.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

4. According to Margot Wittkower and Rudolf Wittkower, *Born under Saturn* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), p. 221, “Excessive drinking is not

a Mediterranean vice and drunkards were hardly known among Italian artists." See also Alison Stewart, "Paper Festivals and Popular Entertainment: The Kermis Woodcuts of Sebald Beham in Reformation Nuremberg," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1993):301–350, for some representations of excessive drinking in Renaissance Germany.

5. Vasari, II, p. 499. Vasari writes of Heemskerck in his *vita* of Battista Franco.

6. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. J. G. Nichols (New York: Knopf, 2009), p. 473.

7. Vasari, I, p. 554.

8. Franco Sacchetti, *Il Trecentonovelle*, ed. Emilio Faccioli (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1970), p. 492. For further discussion of this story, see Norman E. Land, "The Birds of Bartolo Goggi," *SOURCE: Notes in the History of Art* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2008):22–24.

9. Sacchetti, p. 225.

10. Vasari, I, p. 485. For Vasari's presentation of Ercole, see also Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 127.

11. Lodovico Domenichi, *Facetie, motti e burle, di diversi signori et persone private* (Venice: Appresso Andrea Muschio, 1571), pp. 204–205 (the first edition appeared in 1548): "Io conobbi già un pittore molto eccellente nell'arte sua, ma fuor di modo prodigo, e amico del vino: Ora servendosi di costui un signore, il quale lo faceva dipingere in un suo castello, et ricercando l'opera incominciata lungo tempo, il pittore mostrò d'haver bisogno d'alcuni colori, e così di certi

denari, co' quali egli voleva andare alla città vicina, e comperare ciò che gli pare va necessario a finire il lavoro. Il gentilhuomo credendo semplicemente alle parole, gli contò i denari, co' quali egli domandava d'andare alla città. Ora come e' fu giunto quivi, egli si siccò in una buona hosteria et non provide altrimenti i colori. Il gentilhuomo dopo alcuni giorni veggendo, che'l pittore non tornava, ordinò a servitori, che cercassero di lui. I quali havendolo trovato in un branco di beoni et huomini di buon tempo; lo richiamarono a casa, e domandandolo s'egli havea compero i colori, il pittore disse che gli haveva comparati, ma che per neglittentia s'eran perduti. Mai servidori guardandolo bene in viso, videro che il vino gli haveva dato un bellissimo colore onde aspramente il vi presero, che egli volesse dire d'havere perduti i colori, che egli haveva compro dall' hoste: anchora che dubitassero che doppo questa ubbriachezza il pallido non gli togliesse il colore." My thanks to Carol Lazzaro-Weiss for helping me to understand the meaning and significance of the last sentence.

12. For other tales about wine and colors, see Norman E. Land, "Vasari's Buffalmacco and the Transubstantiation of Paint," *Renaissance Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Fall 2005):881–895.

13. Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: 1718–1721), I, pp. 90–95. I have used the translation by Michael Hoyle, in Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 1989), pp. 17–18.

THE SISTINE CHAPEL CHANCEL SCREEN AS METAPHOR

Kerr Houston

Aware of the iconic status of the Sistine Chapel and cognizant of what Benedict Nicolson once termed the “endless flow” of scholarship involving Michelangelo, one might reasonably assume that the basic geography of the chapel in Michelangelo’s time is by now a subject of firm consensus.¹

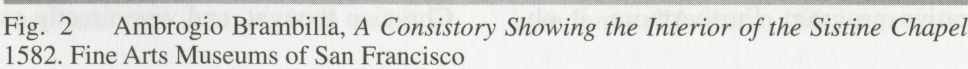
But no. For while the original appearance of the chapel (which was completed in 1483) is relatively clear, the relationship between the chapel’s layout and Michelangelo’s ceiling frescoes (which were added between 1508 and 1512) still sparks disagreement.² Consider, for example, the marble screen that separated the presbytery from the outer chapel (and that was moved to its current location, nearer the entrance, in the 1550s). In 1979, Esther Gordon Dotson wrote that “the chancel screen was formerly placed below the Creation of Eve,” while Edmund Leach insisted, in 1985, that “the screen . . . stood directly beneath the border between ‘The Creation of Eve’ and ‘The Fall.’”³ Below the fresco? Below its border? It cannot have been both, for the screen was only roughly 40 centimeters thick and was immobile. And yet contradictory assertions pile up. In 2005, Meredith Gill referred to “the chancel screen dividing the *Creation of Eve* from the *Temptation and Fall*,” five years later, Andrew Graham-Dixon emphasized the position of the *Creation of Eve*, noting that it originally occupied “a place directly above the screen.”⁴

How to understand such conflicting reports? Importantly, as John Shearman once noted, “the original position of the screen is quite clearly marked on the floor . . . ; its precise position was nearly halfway down the chapel, but a little over a meter nearer the entrance” (Fig. 1).⁵ Given that, it is actually easy to stand in the chapel and confirm, as Charles de Tolnay once did, that Michelangelo “made his fifth band from the entrance correspond to the division made by the screen.”⁶ But clarifying that relationship remotely, from photographs, is difficult and depends upon an interest in the physical significance of the screen, an interest that has generally been missing from histories of the chapel. Instead, modern scholars have tended to stress abstract themes and to see the screen’s significance in broad, rather than material, terms. Such readings are typically, we might say, disembodied.

For many early visitors to the chapel, however, the screen was a physical fact: an obstacle that prevented passage into the presbytery. One can gain a sense of this aspect of the screen by looking at Ambrogio Brambilla’s 1582 etching of a Mass in the Sistine Chapel (Fig. 2). By this point, the screen had been moved, its relation to the frescoes above altered. But its basic function had not changed: it served, as it always had, to divide the chapel into two distinct zones. And in this sense, it resembled many comparable examples in other, earlier churches. As



Fig. 1 Reconstruction drawing of the interior of the Sistine Chapel in the late quattrocento. From Ernst Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, 2 vols. (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1901–1905), I, pl. VII



Jacqueline Jung noted, in a study of Gothic choir screens, "Scholars and churchgoers alike have long understood the function of choir screens to separate and exclude."⁷ To separate whom, exactly? That depended upon a variety of factors. But in the case of the Sistine Chapel, the screen typically marked the divide between the papal court and the laity, two dozen of whom press up against its grilles in Brambilla's engraving. In a literal way, the Sistine screen thus contributed to the realization of Pius II's insistence that each grade in the chapel should have its own assigned place in a clearly regimented hierarchy.⁸

But the role of the screen in the Sistine Chapel was never merely social; it was also experiential. After all, the chapel stressed, in various ways, motion and passage. It was dedicated, for instance, to the Assumption of the Virgin (which was pictured in the chapel's primary altarpiece); the theme of transit between earth and heaven was thus basic to the identity of the chapel. Likewise, ceremonies held in the chapel regularly involved repeated papal processions toward the altar. Moreover, the chapel's painted programs also suggest directionality. Carol Lewine has discerned in the quattrocento wall paintings a scheme that progresses toward the altar, and de Tolnay interpreted Michelangelo's frescoes as facilitating a Neoplatonic *ascensio* toward the divine. "A cancellata," he observed, "separates the [outer church] from the presbyterium, above which takes place a gradual ascension to a higher sphere."⁹

Well, perhaps for some. But for many lay visitors between 1512 and 1550, the screen flatly interrupted the theme of passage implicit in the chapel's dedication, liturgy, and decorative program. Furthermore, it ob-

scured their view of the altar, the papal throne, and the wall paintings in the presbytery. And, finally, it also interfered, as William John Meegan recently stated, with their perception of details in the frescoes overhead. "It is very difficult," Meegan noted, "to view certain details in the various scenes from any part of the floor. Yet, consider how much more difficult it would have been for the average spectator viewing the remaining frescos [*sic*] on the walls and scenes on the ceiling, from the choir screen's position."¹⁰ Certainly, the enlarged figural scale used by Michelangelo in the frescoes nearest the altar may have lessened such a difficulty. But the fact remains: visitors who found their passage obstructed by the screen could obtain no more than an oblique view of the five narrative frescoes that stood above the presbytery.

That fact seems especially significant for two important reasons. First, it is only in those five frescoes that Michelangelo's God makes a visible appearance. Absent from the four scenes that stand over the chapel's nave, he is present in each of the five that stand above the presbytery.¹¹ In other words, those members of the laity who were restricted to the outer church were granted only oblique views of the divine: they could look directly up at the stories of Adam and Noah, but they were thwarted from fully approaching God. Such an observation assumes a fuller meaning, in turn, when one makes a second observation: that the theme of man's distance from God was a common one in Renaissance theology and oratory, and that it was often linked to our corporeal nature.

Of course, the idea of a barrier between humanity and God was hardly unique to the Renaissance. It was common in Jewish and Christian thought, and was directly associ-

ated, in fact, with the two prophets who are seated, in Michelangelo's ceiling, adjacent to the chancel screen's original position. Consider, first, Ezekiel, whose painted throne stood just west of the screen and whose prophecy of the closed gate was the subject of considerable discussion in the Italian Renaissance.¹² "And the Lord said to me," reads Ezekiel 44:2-3, "This gate shall be shut: it shall not be opened; and no man shall pass through it; because the Lord the God of Israel hath entered in by it: and it shall be shut for the prince." The placement of Isaiah, too, is significant, since his position just outside the screen and next to the *Temptation and Fall* evokes Isaiah 59:2 ("Your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you"). The theme of a barrier between man and God, and of a consequently obscured divine face, was thus explicit in the books of the two prophets painted nearest the screen.

Significantly, such a theme was actively developed in a number of influential Italian Renaissance texts. For example, Egidio da Viterbo, the prominent Augustinian who has been repeatedly advanced as a possible designer of Michelangelo's ceiling program, advanced a comparable idea at several points. In a sermon delivered in Rome in 1507, Egidio stated that "the soul is almost divine, yet being wedded to the gross body it has been contaminated with the first touches of disease, as it were." That meant, he continued, that earthbound man could not enjoy a truly golden life, for such a life "is reserved for those who enjoy the vision of God's beauty in heaven."¹³ In other words, as John O'Malley has observed, Egidio implies that the body is a sort of prison, or sepulcher, and that man, as long as he is

encumbered with a body, may yearn for the divine but will not be able to perceive it fully.¹⁴ Standing directly between an image of original sin and an image of God, the screen thus assumed, if viewed in relation to Michelangelo's frescoes, a powerful illustrative quality: it kept many, simply because of their solid bodies, from obtaining the most direct view of God.

Italian Neoplatonists shared Egidio's interest in the conceit of a partial or frustrated vision of God. In his commentary on Plato, for instance, Marsilio Ficino contended that the human mind could hardly understand the divine essence in its entirety. "What then?" he asked, only to answer his own question: "We must suppose that the mind looks up at God but does not entirely comprehend Him."¹⁵ Ficino's wording evokes the predicament of a viewer on the outside of the Sistine screen. Similarly, in his Neoplatonic commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Cristoforo Landino wrote that man is composed of spirit and body, and that "spirit, then, submerged in this dark prison, loses almost all its celestial power, and because of the shadows of its body remains almost deprived of the light of reason."¹⁶ Embodiment, in such a view, inevitably produces a gulf between man and God, a gulf that was paralleled in the distance between lay viewers and the God depicted in the Sistine frescoes.

Finally, we might turn to the artist himself. Michelangelo knew the writings of both Ficino and Landino, and it is thus unsurprising that the theme of a limited perception occurred repeatedly in his poetry as well.¹⁷ In poem 164, for example, Michelangelo complained that "sick eyes can't move from earthly to divine, but are bogged down here forever." In poem 166, he extended the

image, writing that "our bodies, so mortal, cloddish, without wings, can't follow the least of angels in their zone."¹⁸ Admittedly, these poems were written decades after the Sistine frescoes had been completed. But they were typical of a consistent outlook. As Erwin Panofsky once observed, "When Michelangelo speaks, as so many others had done and continued to do, of the human body as of the '*carcer terrene*,' the 'earthly prison' of the immortal soul, he carried out this much-used metaphor in tortured attitudes of struggle or defeat. His figures symbolize the fight waged by the soul to escape from the bondage of matter. But their plastic isolation denotes the impenetrability of their prison."¹⁹ Panofsky was thinking primarily of Michelangelo's sculptural work, but his characterization, and Michelangelo's own poetic imagery, apply equally easily to a lay viewer's experience of the frescoes that stood above the Sistine presbytery. To such a viewer, the divine realm was obstructed and remote: the embodied individual was held back.

In his study of more than 160 sermons delivered in the Sistine Chapel and in Saint Peter's basilica between 1450 and 1521, O'Malley noticed an interesting tendency: repeatedly, the preachers refer to a divine order and then urge their listeners to look up. The preachers suggest, wrote O'Malley, that "man is capable of discovering the divine vestiges in the world around him and of discovering the image and likeness according to which he was made only if he raises his eyes to heaven. He must 'look up.'"²⁰ To the pope, the cardinals, and the other dignitaries assembled in the Sistine presbytery after 1512, such an instruction would have made obvious sense: in looking up, they would have seen Michelangelo's images of God directly above them. And perhaps, as de Tolnay argued, some of them

felt as if their soul were freed from a bodily prison and they had attained "a state of absolute freedom in infinity."²¹ Others, doubtless, responded differently. Regardless, they enjoyed a privileged view of the ceiling frescoes.

Those who stood just beyond the screen, however, found themselves in a different situation. If they heeded the preachers' advice and looked up, they saw an image of human sin. To be sure, they could also see the paintings of God above the presbytery, but always only at a distance, precisely because of the body that was posited as the source of shame in a fresco directly above them. Depending upon their philosophy, they might have thought of their predicament in various ways: in terms of the corrupt nature of matter, or Augustine's binarism, or the redeeming, reparative nature of Christ's sacrifice or the sacraments. Regardless of the interpretive community to which they belonged, though, each viewer was most likely familiar at some level with the widely shared idea that our bodies obviate a direct interaction with God. And they thus participated in an aspect of the Sistine Chapel's larger logic. In his illuminating study of Renaissance art and spectators, John Shearman offered an overview of the ways in which Renaissance artists engaged the viewer. He described a trajectory "from awareness and acknowledgement, to the spectator's entering into the artist's subject and completing its plot, and finally from that kind of involvement to its exploitation, the artist assuming, now, the complicity of the spectator in the very functioning of the work of art."²² But if full artistic complicity thus matured in the cinquecento, complicity had, in another sense, much older roots. After all, in *City of God*, Augustine had written that "we all were in that one man [Adam], since we all were that one man who fell into

sin by the woman who was made from him before the sin.”²³ In looking up at the Sistine ceiling, viewers outside the screen were thus complicit in the original sin that had dis-

tanced man from God—a predicament made both literal and explicit by the position of the marble screen.

NOTES

1. Benedict Nicolson, “Milking the Bull,” *Burlington Magazine* 117, no. 864 (Mar. 1975):131.

2. On the original appearance of the chapel, see Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 11, and John Shearman, “The Chapel of Sixtus IV,” in *The Sistine Chapel: The Art, the History, and the Restoration*, ed. Carlo Pietrangeli *et al.* (New York: Harmony, 1986), pp. 22–91, esp. 31.

3. Esther Gordon Dotson, “An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling, Part I,” *Art Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (June 1979):223–256, esp. 238–239; *id.*, “An Augustinian Interpretation . . . , Part II,” *Art Bulletin* 61, no. 3 (Sept. 1979):405–429; Edmund Leach, “Michelangelo’s Genesis: A Structuralist Interpretation of the Central Panels of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling,” *Semiotica* 56, nos. 1–2 (1985):1–30, esp. 9. I have trimmed Leach’s assertion slightly, removing his references to “Panel 5” and “Panel 6” and to his corresponding plate numbers.

4. Meredith J. Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance: Art and Philosophy from Petrarch to Michelangelo* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 176, and Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel* (New York: MJF Books, 2010), p. 91.

5. Shearman, p. 31.

6. De Tolnay, p. 20.

7. Jacqueline E. Jung, “Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches,” *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 4 (Dec. 2000):622–657, esp. 622.

8. John W. O’Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1979), p. 11. Admittedly, the division between papal court and laity was rarely absolute: certain privileged laypeople were occasionally allowed beyond the screen, and during conclaves the outer church would have been filled with church officials.

9. Carol F. Lewine, *The Sistine Chapel Walls and*

the Roman Liturgy (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); de Tolnay, pp. 32 and 40.

10. William John Meegan, “The Sistine Chapel: A Study in Celestial Cartography,” *Rose + Croix Journal* 3 (2006):45–128, esp. 60.

11. This division has been noted by numerous scholars. See, for example, de Tolnay, pp. 11 and 20.

12. For the observation that Filippo Barbieri’s 1481 *Discordantiae Sanctorum Doctorum Hieronymi* emphasizes the passage, see Dotson, “Part II,” 412–413.

13. Francis X. Martin, *Friar, Reformer, and Renaissance Scholar: Life and Work of Giles of Viterbo, 1469–1532*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Villanova, Pa.: Augustinian Press, 1992), pp. 226 and 228.

14. John W. O’Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform: A Study in Renaissance Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), p. 52.

15. Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, ed. James Hankins, trans. Michael J. B. Allen and John Warden, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001–2006), VI, p. 149.

16. Simon A. Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 206.

17. David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 9.

18. John Frederick Nims, ed. and trans., *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 102.

19. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 181.

20. O’Malley, *Praise and Blame*, p. 130.

21. De Tolnay, p. 40.

22. John Shearman, *Only Connect . . . : Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 17.

23. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888), p. 534.

THE AMBIGUITY OF CARAVAGGIO'S *MEDUSA*

Paul Barolsky

What can we say about Caravaggio's rendering of the decapitated head of Medusa, which he painted so vividly upon the bright green surface of a shield c. 1600 (Fig. 1)? Although the image of the frightening Gorgon represented on armor or shields was a deep convention, Caravaggio brought unprecedented vitality and immediacy to his subject. His portrayal of Medusa is so shocking in its veracity and horrific details that we can easily overlook the simple fact that she herself appears shocked.

Caravaggio rendered or evoked decapitation in paintings of Holofernes, Saint John, and Goliath, but in those works the head of the victim is seen in its larger context. In the image of Medusa, however, the painter isolates the head and thus intensifies our focus upon her powerful gaze, which has the power to petrify those whose gaze she meets.

Although Caravaggio's Medusa is decapitated, a fact that indicates her bloody death, she appears to us as if intensely alive, her eyes bulging, her mouth wide open, not inconceivably suggesting, as some have said, a scream.

The painter seemingly seeks to capture and convey Medusa's state of mind at the very last pulse of life. Mortality is magnified by our awareness that all those upon whom

Medusa gazes are petrified. As we confront Medusa's gaze, we thus confront our own mortality, and, yielding to this illusion, we are conscious of our own final split second of life and consciousness before we turn to stone. Or are we?

Medusa's appearance upon Caravaggio's shield suggests another implication or connotation of the image. For we recall that Perseus, who slayed Medusa by cutting off her head, survived her deadly gaze by looking not directly upon her, but at her reflection on his shield. Caravaggio's image thus evokes the very shield of Perseus, in which case we, in the place of Perseus, gaze upon a lifesaving reflection.

In the final analysis, we must acknowledge our uncertainty when confronting the possible implications of Caravaggio's highly suggestive and ambiguous image. Iconographical method does not easily resolve the ambiguities of the picture. Perhaps, however, we can be certain of one thing: the painter's shockingly realistic image is not only a remarkably vivid representation of outer appearances, not only a meditation on mortality; it is also a penetrating portrayal and suggestion of consciousness itself—both Medusa's final instant of consciousness and our consciousness, in the face of her mortality, of our own finality.



Fig. 1 Caravaggio, *Medusa*. Uffizi, Florence

JACKSON POLLOCK'S MAGUEY SHORTHAND

Stephen Polcari

The maguey plant is a frequent image in Mexican art. The Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros both used it in their work (Fig. 1). Although it has gone unrecognized, so did Jackson Pollock. Indeed, it became a platform for him to both learn and articulate his own direction.

Pollock was greatly indebted to the Mexicans (including Diego Rivera). He drew from the imagery, form, subject, and technique of the "Tres Grandes," as they were called, as well as from the Regionalism of Thomas Hart Benton, who was his teacher in the early 1930s. However, with impending crises both personal (the recognition of his alcoholism) and historical (the coming of World War II), the Mexicans' art of crisis and struggle took precedence over Benton's Regionalism in the late 1930s.

Pollock drew the maguey cactus with its broad, pointed leaves in a pencil work of 1938–1941 (Fig. 2). Rather than making a straightforward rendering of the plant as the Mexicans did, however, Pollock imbued his image with his own symbols. These reveal his movement from the Mexican-nationalist descriptive manner to the shamanic, symbolic one that formed the basis of his art throughout his career. (What have been called Pollock's "irrational fantasies" of the unconscious for half a century are really verifiable shamanic ritual forms and images.)¹ Later, the Mexican forms would be supplemented with Jungian and Native American forms, allegedly making them a gateway to

the unconscious, as his friend John Graham suggested in his famous article "Primitive Art and Picasso" in the *Magazine of Art* (April 1937). For example, Pollock's maguey plant consists not so much of pointed leaves as a flamelike burst of pointed, curving forms drawn from Siqueiros's 1932 Los Angeles mural *Tropical America*. In the mural, instead of leaves there is a writhing forest of biomorphic shapes.

In the 1930s, the formative years of his work, Pollock often employed the symbol of fire to suggest destructive creativity. From *The Flame* of 1938–1941, to the backgrounds of innumerable drawings such as those in his "Mexican" notebook, to the major canvases of *Bald Woman with Skeleton* and *Birth* of the same period, Pollock painted fire as a symbol of creation. In addition, fire represents the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new, for flame is metaphor for transformative shamanic "heat," which was fundamental to Pollock's art throughout his career, including later paintings such as *Eyes in the Heat* (1946), *Phosphorescence* (1947), and *White Light* (1954). Also, Pollock's work frequently contains representations of intercourse, in which friction likewise provides procreative—and, thus, creative—heat. He even used a swastika, commonly found on Southwest Anasazi ceramics and associated with fire and the movement of the sun,² as well as color symbolism to represent the fertilizing energy of the red/yellow sun and elements of the male



Fig. 1 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Maguey*. 1939. Poster. Private collection



Fig. 2 Jackson Pollock, *Untitled* (third notebook, fol. 4). 1938–1941. Graphite and colored pencils on paper, 14¼ × 10 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; purchase, anonymous gift, 1990. In Francis Valentine O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, eds., *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), III, p. 463

principle in the very unusual monochromatic painting, the yellow *Sun-Scape*.³ *Yellow Triangle* of 1945 takes on new meaning in this light.

It is significant that “heat” joins fire in Pollock’s work, because they both reflect shamanic ritual and ecstasy. Indeed, the relationship among friction, fire, heat, and light is an analogue to the sacred initiation process and its outcome. Copulation is a process of heating and releasing energy (see *Male and Female* of 1942). And the shamanic “Vedic term *sram* means ‘to heat oneself.’”⁴ The shaman, the supreme master of fire, embodies a heat so fierce that its spiritual luminescence represents both purity and knowledge. The rousing of mystical heat to achieve fire mastery is common to mystics worldwide.⁵ Heat is an agent of transmutation. As an Inuit shaman explains, “Every real shaman has to feel an illumination in his body, in the inside of his head or in his brain, something that gleams like fire, that gives him the power to see with closed eyes into the darkness, into hidden things or into the future, or into the secrets of another man.”⁶ (Closed eyes appear in a figure with a nimbus in Pollock’s *The Key* of 1945.) Perhaps one of the better-known features of Native American life is the sweat lodge, where the shaman and others pray and purify themselves for the greater well-being of the community.

In his shamanic journey and initiation to a higher spirituality, the shamanic neophyte, at least in his own mind, undergoes several rites, including torture and violent dismemberment, that define him as a shaman—that is, as someone different from the profane (and from the rest of his people). For example, his flesh (or her flesh—a shaman may be male or female) is scraped away until the body is reduced to bone or skeleton—that is, to “death.” In Pollock’s drawing (Fig. 2),

the bones are placed at the edges of the maguey plant. The shaman spends a period in the “underworld,” during which time he is taught the future by spirits, souls of dead shamans, and demons before he finally ascends to a higher level of consciousness and wisdom.⁷ Thus, the human everyday condition of the shaman dies, and the shaman is reborn to a new transhuman or ecstatic existence.⁸

The skeletal bones suggest espousal of the shamanic concept of “boneseed.” In many Native American myths, particularly those of the Northwest, bones contain the spirits of slain animals as a people’s ancestors. When the bones arise from the earth, they will eventually take on flesh again—hence, the term “boneseed.” The bones arise to signal rebirth, for the rising of old bones refers to the shamanic ceremony of transformation—that is, refleshing or rebirth, from the older, ancestral powers. In stripping down to a skeleton of “death,” the shaman is purified, and new, forceful life can then arise.

Finally, Pollock’s maguey plant subtly renders a third symbol: the rounded folds of a V-like form suggesting upside-down labia in the center—that is, Pollock’s symbol for a vagina. It derives from a simple fold in Orozco’s *Prometheus*, Pollock’s favorite painting in North America. However, Pollock’s use becomes visible in innumerable drawings such as the untitled work in Figure 3 and the one in volume III on page 479 of the *catalogue raisonné*,⁹ where multiple vaginas suggest a creative burst. But Pollock’s phallic and vaginal imagery is not about sex; it is about fertility and birth, as we saw him indicate with his painting *Birth* in 1938–1941. Birth is part of the cycle of death and rebirth, and is of great importance to Pollock and his colleagues. Birth means rebirth, and its symbolic tools—the phallus



Fig. 3 Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*. 1934–1938. Colored pencils, pen, and India ink on paper, $11\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{7}{8}$ in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; gift of Lee Krasner Pollock, 1982. In Francis Valentine O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, eds., *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), III, p. 392



Fig. 4 Jackson Pollock, *Composition with Pouring II*. 1943. Oil and enamel on canvas, 25 × 22¹/₈ in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

and vagina—mean the procreative forces that Pollock turns into symbols of the creative. The vagina thus joins with the heat of shamanic ritual and old bones to suggest a process of renewal that is fundamental to Pollock himself and to the world in which he lived: the world of World War II and the dominance of ominously mechanistic, rational, scientific, “dead” mass man. The renewal of his psyche represents the renewal of life itself in his disturbed, turbulent times.

Pollock thus revisioned the plant to his specifications. But its example to him did not end there. In 1939, Siqueiros painted a maguey plant. (This work was also made into a poster.) At its bottom is a perfect example of one of his experiments—the dripped line. In the Laboratory Workshop of 1936 in New York, where Pollock worked under Siqueiros, Siqueiros experimented with Duco Enamel, spray guns, and other instruments. It has been well recognized that Siqueiros taught Pollock to drip and work on the floor, but there are few significant extant examples of Siqueiros’s dripping. This painting (and the poster made after it) contains such an example, which consists of lines and scumbled forms, the very first forms of Pollock’s own dripping, at the bottom of the image. We see these same lines and forms in the painting *Untitled* (1940–1941), which Pollock made in collaboration

with William Baziotes and Gerome Kamrowski, where the artists played with them. This painting is considered the record of Pollock’s first experimental drip. In 1943, he followed up with *Composition with Pouring I* and particularly *II* (Fig. 4), which are Pollock’s true first elaborations of drippings in mature paintings. He would repeat these intermittently until the final maturation of the technique in 1947–1950.

Thus, it is clear that Siqueiros lies behind Pollock’s dripping, not simply Surrealist automatism and the work of Hans Hofmann and others who are usually suggested as Pollock’s source. Pollock’s drips match those of his Siqueiros exercises; Siqueiros’s maguey plant provides at least an example to us and, because of its date of 1939, of the importance of the Laboratory Workshop.

From shamanic rebirth to drip vitalism, the Mexican muralists were midwives to Pollock’s development. His maguey drawing may just be a fillip in his total oeuvre, but it reveals, more clearly than his elaborate paintings, the nature of his symbols and his debts. In this drawing, once again, Pollock follows his pattern of transforming Mexican politics into his own ritual, psychic ones, something he did with his larger canvases as well. Sometimes small efforts are more telling than bigger ones.

NOTES

1. See Stephen Polcari, *Jackson Pollock et le chamanisme* (Paris: Pinacothèque, 2008), for a full discussion of Pollock’s shamanism. For further discussion, see *id.*, *Jackson Pollock: Mass Man Agonist*, forthcoming.

2. Joan Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 117.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

9. Francis Valentine O’Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, eds., *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), III, p. 479.

THE FACE OF EVIL:

H. C. WESTERMANN'S *THE EVIL NEW WAR GOD* (S.O.B.) (1958)

David McCarthy

Hardly unresearched in the scholarship on H. C. Westermann, the sculpture *The Evil New War God* (S.O.B.) (1958) nonetheless warrants additional investigation (Fig. 1).¹ This is especially true when considering the leading descriptor of its title. "Evil," Westermann asserts, is a defining characteristic of this strange *personnage*. Of equal weight is the final phrase. This simplifies matters in that the title might easily be condensed to *Evil S.O.B.*, suggesting a state of wickedness having taken up residence in man. Not just any man, but this particular son of a bitch. It is my contention that the title provides not only an obvious guide for interpreting the sculpture, but also one that points to the milieu within which Westermann worked. At once broadly articulated—because evil is a result of actual "material forces," as literary critic Terry Eagleton has recently argued—the title, like the figure it names, is also specific to the period, once the target of Westermann's satire is identified.²

A decade ago, art historian Michael Rooks linked *The Evil New War God* (S.O.B.) with the hydrogen bomb, because physicists I. I. Rabi and Enrico Fermi had dubbed it an "evil thing" in a hearing before the Atomic Energy Commission in 1949.³ There is much to recommend this linkage because nuclear war was a prominent theme in Westermann's oeuvre in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As I have argued elsewhere, other sculptures that protested such warfare include *Brinkmanship* (1959; Hirshhorn Museum

and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.) and *Evil Force* (1962; private collection).⁴ Each presents a grotesque *personnage* reminiscent of science fiction. The effect conveys the horrifying transformation of humans into cybernetic monsters.⁵ Yet the concept of evil was not exclusively tied to the hydrogen bomb, first detonated by the United States in 1952, and we do well to situate the sculpture's title within a broader set of concerns.

These concerns stemmed from the way World War II ended, with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and from the escalating and histrionic Cold War rhetoric that sought to draw clear distinctions, in absolute terms, between the capitalist West and communist East. A few examples make the point. The bomb was linked with evil shortly after the end of the war. J. Robert Oppenheimer, director of the Manhattan Project, made the connection that November. "We have made a thing that by all the standards of the world we grew up in is an evil thing," he confessed in an essay calling for international control of the technology.⁶ The following year, American historian and sociologist Lewis Mumford described nuclear weapons as a "cosmic evil," brought to the world by a group of "madmen."⁷ Among these "madmen" were the scientists, generals, and politicians who first guided the massive project to split the atom and who then decided to use the bomb—twice—on largely civilian populations. In this regard,

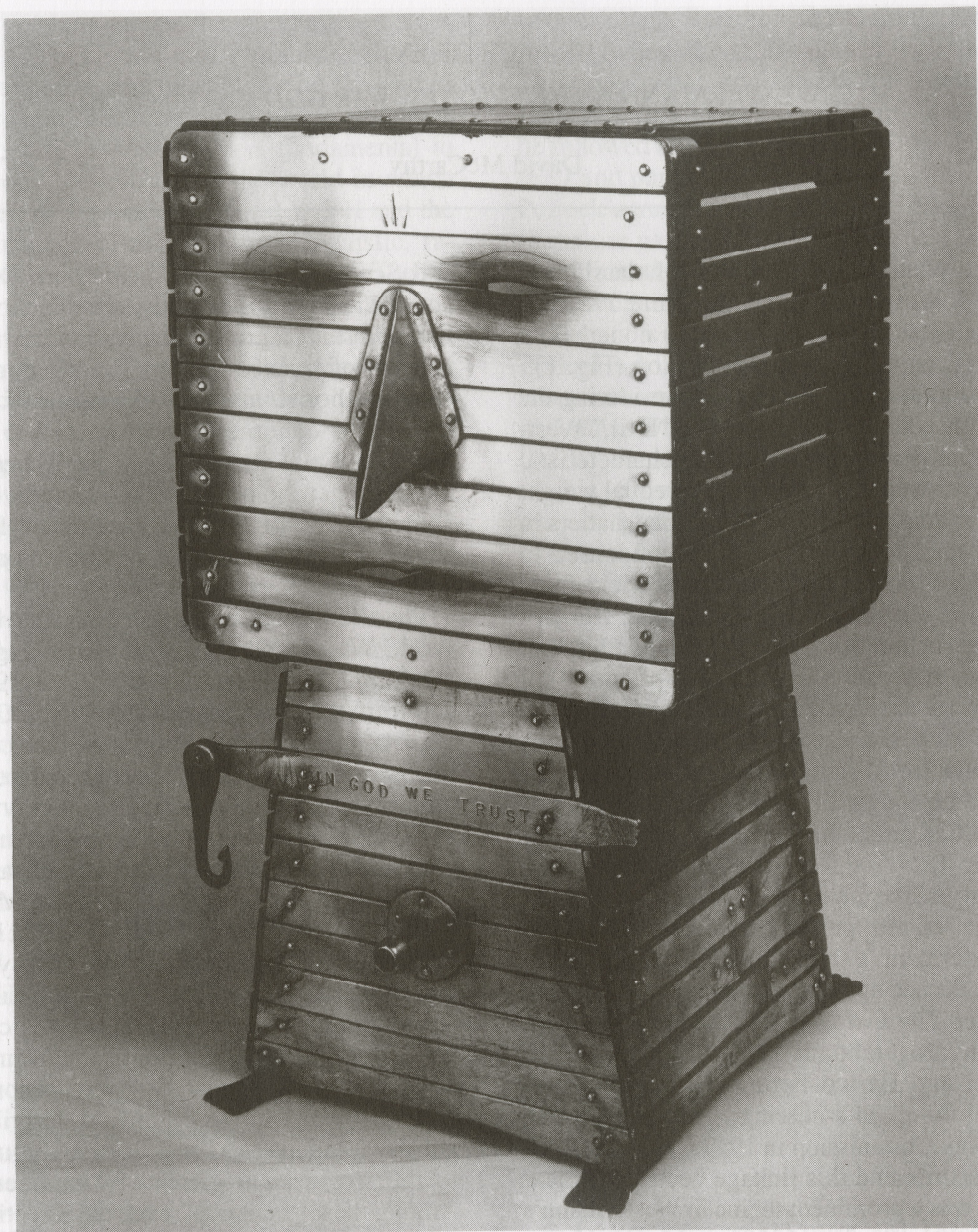


Fig. 1 H. C. Westermann, *The Evil New War God (S.O.B.)*. 1958. Brass, partly chrome-plated, $16\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{3}{4} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$ in. ($42.6 \times 24.8 \times 26.0$ cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Howard and Jean Lipman. 97.113.10. Art © Lester Beall, Jr. Trust/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

the sobriquet of "S.O.B." appended to the sculpture's title uncannily echoed physicist Kenneth Bainbridge's comments to Oppenheimer after the Trinity test (the first detonation of a nuclear bomb) at Jornada del Muerto, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945: "Now we are all sons of bitches."⁸ Although there is no indication that this story was known outside the Manhattan Project at that time, Westermann's sage use of the term is a reminder of the fear and anger that the bomb, as well as its inventors, could generate. To return to Eagleton's argument about "material forces," evil was strongly linked with the bomb and those men responsible for it. This was not the only specter rampant in the age of anxiety, however.

In a speech before Congress on October 3, 1945, President Harry Truman linked the bomb, global communism, and evil: "Atomic force in ignorant or evil hands could inflict untold disaster upon the nation and the world," he cautioned. "Society cannot hope even to protect itself—much less to realize the benefits of the discovery—unless prompt action is taken to guard against the hazards of misuse."⁹ The president hardly needed to mention that the great fear driving the Manhattan Project was the knowledge that the Germans were attempting to develop their own bomb; nor did he need to state that the current competitor for atomic weaponry was the Soviet Union. Suffice it to say, the language placed in dire—even apocalyptic—terms the mounting tension between the world's reigning superpowers. All of this indicates that considerations of the bomb were inextricably intertwined with a profound fear of what a nuclear world might bring and with a simplistic understanding of international communism. This was but one way of linking evil, nuclear weaponry, and communism.

In his nuanced and sobering consideration

of Cold War conflict, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr consistently raised the specter of evil, not to affirm the unchanging opposition of West and East, but to offer a cautionary tale about righteousness leading to corruption when not tempered by humility and self-awareness. In *The Irony of American History* (1952), he reasoned that the United States might have to engage in a total war to guarantee the protection of democratic rights. "If men or nations do evil in a good cause . . ." he wrote, "they make a tragic choice. Thus the necessity of using the threat of atomic destruction as an instrument for the preservation of peace is a tragic element in our contemporary situation."¹⁰ For Niebuhr, the situation was one that also lent itself to irony because humans were responsible for creating it. In the postwar world, virtue might easily become vice, strength weakness, security insecurity, and wisdom folly when the former of these linked concepts was perceived as an absolute in itself. Although he had little sympathy for communism, Niebuhr worried that triumph in World War II and the polarizing rhetoric of the Cold War had led the United States to perceive its own innocence and virtue as unquestioned. But, he wondered, would the country remain so innocent and virtuous if, through the use of atomic weapons, it destroyed—or threatened to destroy—the world to save it? By his reasoning, evil was a force that transcended any particular ideology. More important, it lived through the actions of people: political realists, naïve idealists, anticommunist hardliners, and military leaders. Despite the theologian's warnings that the United States was capable of evil, popular consensus continued to attribute that trait to the Soviet Union in particular and to communism in general. Such easy bifurcation was not what Westermann had in mind when he entitled his

sculpture, nor does he seem to have intended that we understand the sculpture as being exclusively about the bomb. Instead, the sculpture seems to be about the actions and attitudes of those men who had control of the bomb.

A flat-footed gunslinger who is squat, aggressive, and angry ironically recalls the language of the Western showdown, pitting the man with the badge against a man in black, the trope realized in so many Hollywood films but perhaps most memorably for Westermann's generation in the 1952 film *High Noon*, starring Gary Cooper.¹¹ Westermann seems to invoke the general concept only to provide a useful foil against which to read *The Evil New War God (S.O.B.)*. After all, this gunman lacks hands with which to fire his weapon. In turn, the weapon is given male anatomical specificity as it aggressively, if perhaps diminutively, thrusts into space. More telling is the rendition of the head. In 1959, Peter Selz rightly linked it with the military construction the blockhouse.¹² It is an easy semantic shift to move from blockhouse to blockhead. Indeed, the latter word immediately precedes the former in most American dictionaries. The stupid person—that is, the blockhead—subject to scorn, is, in fact, one of Westermann's favorite targets during this period. In this vein, General Curtis LeMay was ridiculed in *Brinkmanship* and probably *The Evil Force* as well. The motif of the cigar in these two later sculptures is the identifying link because of a famous photograph of the general with a cigar firmly planted in his mouth (Fig. 2).¹³ *The Evil New War God (S.O.B.)* shares with this photograph the blocky head, the thin lips, and the horizontal banding of the venetian blinds in the background (transposed to the head and body of the sculpture

itself). The eyes in particular link the sculpture and the photograph. Slightly hooded and baggy from overwork, yet also steady and emotionally vacant, the eyes are those of a killer as he calmly assesses the prey before him.

The photograph was part of an extensive and laudatory review in the June 14, 1954, issue of *Life* magazine on LeMay and the Strategic Air Command (SAC).¹⁴ Billed as the "toughest cop of the western world," his job was to keep the SAC in a state of readiness to bomb the Soviet Union at a moment's notice. He had organized, and frequently personally led, the carpet bombing of Europe during the war. He was also the architect of the firebombing of Japan in the months preceding the deployment of the atomic bombs. This "hard taskmaster," the text invoked in near reverent and awed tones, this "thoroughgoing professional soldier," "would not hesitate a moment . . . in unleashing the terrible power that now lies in his hands with the B-36, the B-47, the B-52 and the hydrogen bomb."¹⁵ In referencing the general via a widely published photograph, Westermann asserted that LeMay was the face of evil. He was the dutiful servant of United States power, the professional soldier ready to destroy the entire world in order to save it from communist domination. A genuine American hero, he was also quite possibly a villain of epic proportion.

Identifying the target of Westermann's anger grounds the sculpture within its historical moment, while documenting the artist's resistance to the polarizing shibboleths of that age. He embraced a sensibility that deployed irony as well as satire to register his opposition to a world that dared to envision its imminent destruction. In calling this brand of international politics evil and



Fig. 2 A. Y. Owen, photograph of Curtis LeMay. From Ernest Havemann, "Toughest Cop of the Western World," *Life* 36 (14 June 1954):133. © Getty Images

in linking it with the responsibilities of a pivotal figure in the United States military command, Westermann lodged his profound fear of a country apparently ready to reduce

the complexities of global politics to a simple showdown, one that promised to leave no one standing in its aftermath.

NOTES

1. For more than fifty years, the sculpture has been exhibited, reproduced, and interpreted, making it one of Westermann's signature works. See Dennis Adrian, *H. C. Westermann: Recent Work*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Allan Frumkin Gallery, 1958), unpagged; Peter Selz, *New Images of Man*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), p. 141; Max Kozloff, *H. C. Westermann*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968), p. 10; Robert Doty, *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), unpagged; Barbara Haskell, *H.C.W.*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978), p. 41; Dennis Adrian, *H.C. Westermann*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1980), unpagged; Michael Rooks and Lynne Warren, *H. C. Westermann: Exhibition Catalogue and Catalogue Raisonné of Objects* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), p. 231; and David McCarthy, *H. C. Westermann at War: Art and Manhood in Cold War America* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), pp. 87–90.

2. Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 150.

3. Rooks and Warren, p. 231. On Rabi and Fermi, see United States Atomic Energy Commission, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer: Transcript of Hearing before Personnel Security Board, Washington D.C., April 12, 1954, through May 6, 1954* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1954), pp. 79–80.

4. See McCarthy, pp. 90–104.

5. Historian Peter Galison notes that the “cold-blooded, machinelike opponent” was an important,

and pervasive, means of depicting the “mechanized Enemy Other” during World War II and the Cold War; see Peter Galison, “The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1994):231.

6. J. Robert Oppenheimer, “Atomic Weapons and the Crisis in Science,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 28 (24 Nov. 1945):9.

7. Lewis Mumford, “Gentlemen: You Are Mad!,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 29 (2 Mar. 1946):5.

8. Quoted in Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 675.

9. Harry S. Truman, “Special Message to the Congress on Atom Energy, October 3, 1945,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1945* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 363. Also see Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, I: Year of Decisions* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 530–531. *Time* raised the specter of evil in its justification for selecting Truman as its “Man of the Year” in 1945. See “The Nation: The Bomb and the Man,” *Time* 46 (31 Dec. 1945):16.

10. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), p. vii.

11. “Highpockets Cooper in ‘High Noon,’” *Life* 33 (25 Aug. 1952):73–74, 76, 79.

12. Selz, p. 141.

13. McCarthy, pp. 96–97, 103.

14. Ernest Havemann, “Toughest Cop of the Western World,” *Life* 36 (14 June 1954):132–134, 136, 138, 141–142, 144, 147.

15. *Ibid.*, 136, 144, 147.

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10. The following are examples of periodical (notes 1, 3, 4) and book (notes 2, 5, 6) references done in *SOURCE*'s house style:

1. Heinrich Schwarz, "The Mirror in Art," *Art Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1952):96–118.
2. M.-L. von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 189–191.
3. Schwarz, 98 ff.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Franz, pp. 189–190.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

If more than one work by an author is cited, subsequent references after the initial full reference should repeat the author's name and enough of the work's title to avoid confusion.

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